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ABSTRACT

Individual assessment of students of English as a second language is advocated. Based on a model used by Pearson, four language assessment areas are outlined: the semantic base in a first language, the syntax of the first language, the lexical items "shared" by the two languages, and the number and complexity of the phonemic elements in the target language that are lacking in the student's first language. Additionally, literacy in the first language should be assessed. These areas of consideration are most important for students who are "under-educated." Statistics on educational levels attained by British Columbia adults and by immigrants are presented. The large numbers of under-educated speakers of English as a second language indicates the need for assessment of students in the four language areas before specific decisions are made regarding instruction. (SW)

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FIRST LANGUAGE LITERACY AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

BRUCE BARNES

Bruce Barnes has been a district ESL instructor for the Langley School Board for the past three years. His teaching experience encompasses all ages and levels of competency.

The teaching of English as a second language or as an "additional" language presents several unique instructional problems. Looking at a model used by Pearson, (Introduction to Linguistics Concepts), language can be broken into four distinct parts as in the following model:

The semantic component, (without getting too deeply into the problems of eidetic images a la John Locke), refers to the "meaning" of the language. Thus the meaning of the English term "chair" is denoted by the object I see in front of me having four legs, a particular usage, etc... The syntactic component of language is the term used to describe the manner in which we structure the grammatical elements of a language. Thus in French we have "La plume de ma tante est dans le jardin de mon oncle"; while in English "My aunt's pen is in my uncle's garden". The lexical component refers to all the possible words in a given language -- which number, in English, is considerable ... and somewhat more than in other languages. The phonetic component of language refers to the sounds or sound system used to convey the words of the language. Thus although infants can give voice to the phonemes of all languages, English is restricted to from 40-42 distinct sound elements. English lacks, for example, some of the vowel sounds of Mandarin or the more gutteral tones of Persian or Arabic.

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The difficulty in second language teaching and learning is that the student often enters the learning situation with a fairly well developed semantic component, a syntactic system that may contain very similar or very different structures than English, and lexical and phonetic systems that vary in their degree of similarity to English as well.

Instruction in English as a second language can only begin after an individual assessment of a student's needs as regards to:

(1) the prior development of a semantic base in a first language

(2) the syntax of the first language -- and the student's knowledge of the grammatical elements of his own language

(3) the "shared" lexical items between the two languages or a commonality of "root" and word origins, and;

(4) the number and complexity of the phonemic elements in the target language that are lacking in the student's first language.

To these linguistic differences and the related pedogogical difficulties, I would add a further element that must be entered into an assessment of a student's needs. The element to be considered is the level of literacy in a first language that is brought to the second language learning situation. Consideration of these specific needs is most important as regards to:

(1) "under-educated" adults seeking instruction in English as a second language, and

(2) the children of "under-educated" adults learning English as a second language.

The question thus becomes one of whether or not there exists a significant number of adults in the first category; and, if so, can we assume that there exists a group of children in the second category.

Dickenson, "Education and Training of B. C.'s Adult Population: Extracts from 1971 Census Reports", notes that 7.5% or 108,000 people who were "five years of age or older and not attending school full time (my emphasis) have less than a fifth grade education". An additional 21.8% of the population not attending school full time had from 5 to 8 years schooling, and thus would be considered "under-educated".[1]

In Adult Basic Education and Literacy Activities in Canada 1975-76, Audrey Thomas provides us with an initial breakdown of immigrant education levels:

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[1] "Under-educated" will here refer to those below what is termed the functional literacy level for a given society. In Canada those with less than a grade 9 are not considered functionally literate and are here construed as "under-educated".

Table 17: Immigrant population 15 years and over not attending school full time, 1971: (abstracted data)

REGION	TOTAL IMMIGRANTS	TOTAL IMMIGRANTS WITH LESS THAN GR. 9 NO OTHER TRAINING	% OF REGIONAL TOTAL	% OF CANADIAN TOTAL
CANADA	2,826,175	1,086,425	38.44	100
B. C.	434,460	138,220	31.81	12.72

Thus B. C. has become the residence of 15.3% of the immigrants coming to Canada. At the same time B. C. has received a lower percentage (12.7%) of the total number of immigrants with less than grade 9 and no other training.

The total picture for B. C.[2] indicated that 328,690 people or 23.73% of the population 15 years and over not attending school full time in 1971 had less than a grade 9 and no further training. Placed within an overall picture the educational level of immigrants would appear to be an important factor as Thomas records:

Table 15: Population 15 years and over not attending school full time with less than grade schooling, no other training by birthplace, 1971

REGION	TOTAL	CANADA	U. S. A.	U. K.	OTHER EUROPEAN	OTHER COUNTRIES
CANADA	4,574,130	3,474,130	80,305	199,735	746,215	60,170
%	100%	76.25%	.76%	4.37%	16.31%	1.32%
B. C.	328,690	190,475	12,830	38,120	69,860	17,415
%	100%	57.95%	3.9%	11.6%	21.25%	5.3%

[2] Audrey Thomas, Adult Basic Education.....Table 3, page 8

Thus Canadians born in Canada represent 76% of those who would be considered "under-educated" according to the previous definition. In B. C. as well, nearly 58% of "under-educated" Canadians were born in Canada. However, if you eliminate those Canadians born in Canada, the U. S. A., or the United Kingdom, there still remains 21.25% of those with less than grade 9 born in "other European countries". This alone means that better than one in five people in B. C. (1971) are "under-educated" and also most probably speak English as a second language.[3] Also, even allowing that one-fourth of the people coming from "other countries" speak English as a first language (e.g. New Zealanders, Australians, etc.) it would still allow a good possibility that overall nearly 25%, or one-fourth of those who are "under-educated" also speak English as a second language.[4]

The age groupings for those having less than grade 9 schooling has been given as a percentage of the total within a given age group. Thomas again provides us with figures for Canada and B. C.:

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[3] When the same population (15 years and over etc.) is broken down by ethnic group, one finds 117,690 in non-English speaking ethnic groups; plus 17,065 in a French ethnic group; 15,715 Indian and Eskimo; 33,540 other unknown, 1,125 Jewish (not necessarily linguistically different). This is much higher than the hypothesezed 80-85,000 non-English speakers - and might indicate both first or second "Canadian-born" generations in given ethnic groups perhaps speaking English as a second language.

[4] (It should be noted that Dickenson, found 363,690 "under-educated" individuals (over 15, out of school, and with less than Grade 9, assumably including those with additional training). Both used the figure of 1,385,400 as the total population base, and both utilized the same data. This difference in figures, although important, would not substantially change the over-representation of second language speakers in the ranks of the under-educated.)

REGION	TOTAL	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 64	65+
CANADA	4,574,130	130,095	216,315	595,210	834,925	1,736,370	1,061,215
%	100%	2.84%	4.73%	13.01%	18.25%	37.96%	23.20%
B. C.	328,690	8,020	11,275	32,670	52,490	126,640	97,595
%	100%	2.44%	3.43%	9.94%	15.97%	38.53%	29.69%

These age groupings can also be compared with Thomas' "Periods of Immigration":

Table 18: Population 15 years and over, not attending school full time with less than grade 9, no other training, by period of immigration, 1971

REGION	TOTAL	32 YRS. AGO PRE 1946	22 YRS. AGO PRE 1946-55	18 YRS. AGO PRE 1956-60	13 YRS. AGO PRE 1961-65	10 YRS. AGO PRE 1966-68	7 YRS. AGO PRE 1969-71[a]
CANADA	1,086,425	498,365	235,950	139,170	91,055	77,315	44,570
%	100%	45.87%	21.72%	12.81%	8.38%	7.12%	4.10%
B. C.	138,220	82,705	24,040	13,495	6,650	6,335	4,995
%	100%	59.84%	17.39%	9.76%	4.81%	4.58%	3.61%

The first two periods in this table, pre-1946 and 1946-55 account for 77% of all Canadian immigrants residing in B. C. That is, three-fourths of all immigrants arrived before 1955 and with declining immigration, and the predominance of existing immigrants settling in Ontario - this three-fourths will have changed slowly in B. C. Also, given that the 80-85,000 (see Table 18) immigrants to B. C. would speak English as a second language; it would be safe to assume that those who speak English as a second language would be well-represented in the group of immigrants arriving in 1955 or earlier. Further, given that the 80-85,000 immigrants who

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[a] First five months of 1971 only.

speak English as a second language would be well represented in those arriving 22 years ago and many 32 years ago or more; they would also be well represented in the age groups 35-44, 45-65 and 65+ not attending school full time and with less than grade 9 and no other training (1971).

Nor is it possible to assume that "under-educated" speakers of English as a second language are no longer a significant group requiring specific attention to their special needs. For again as Thomas reports:

Table 19: Percentage of immigrant population 15 years and over, not attending school full time, with less than grade 9, no other schooling by period of immigration 1971. (abstracted)

REGION	PRE 1946	1945-55	1956-60	1961-65	1966-68	1969-71[a]
CANADA	52.40	31.76	33.91	36.82	27.21	23.40
B. C.	44.97	24.07	23.37	33.95	17.08	18.58

Thus, again, although immigration is declining in real numbers -- in B. C. 18.58%, or nearly one-fifth of all immigrants admitted to Canada from 1969 to the first part of 1971 were "under-educated". According to Table 18 this would mean approximately 1,000 persons in B. C. in the 2 year period (1969-71).

The implications for instruction in English as a second language thus stem from three statements derived from the statistics above:

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[a] (included first five months of 1971 only)

(1) In B. C. nearly one in four, of those persons defined as "under-educated" would likely speak English as a second language. (Table 15).

(2) As many as three-fourths of all immigrants with less than a grade 9 education residing in B. C. (1971) arrived in Canada before 1956. A large portion of these immigrants speak English as a second language. (Table 18).

(3) Nearly one-fifth of recent (1966-71) immigrants residing in B. C. who are over 15 and not attending school full time have less than grade 9 and no other training and are thus "under-educated".

The specific implications that might be drawn from these three points include:

(a) Adult Basic Education programmes and Adult E.S.L. programmes must be provided in a well-integrated fashion.

(b) Many first generation Canadians whose parents speak English as a second language are offered a poor language model at home.

(c) Educators must continue to seek sound alternatives in conjunction and in response to the express needs presented by speakers of English as a Second Language.

The more general implication to be drawn from the knowledge of the existence of a large sub-group of under-educated speakers of English as a second language derives from the general language model first presented:

SEMANTIC	SYNTACTIC	LEXICAL	PHONETIC

Thus, given the large numbers of under-educated speakers of English as a second language, with each student an evaluation must be made not only as regards to each of these four components. And each of these components must be viewed within the matrix "under-educated" for the demands of Canadian life and society; or, "Not under-educated" before specific decisions regarding the student's instruction can be made.

Locke, John An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Vol. Two. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. New York, 1959.

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